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*Louis F. Bishop M.D.*

**MEDICINE**

**AS A PROFESSION**

ONE OF A SERIES OF ARTICLES ON THE CHOICE OF A PROFESSION  
ADDRESSED TO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS BY MEN OF VARIOUS  
CALLINGS TEN YEARS AFTER GRADUATION.

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# MEDICINE AS A PROFESSION

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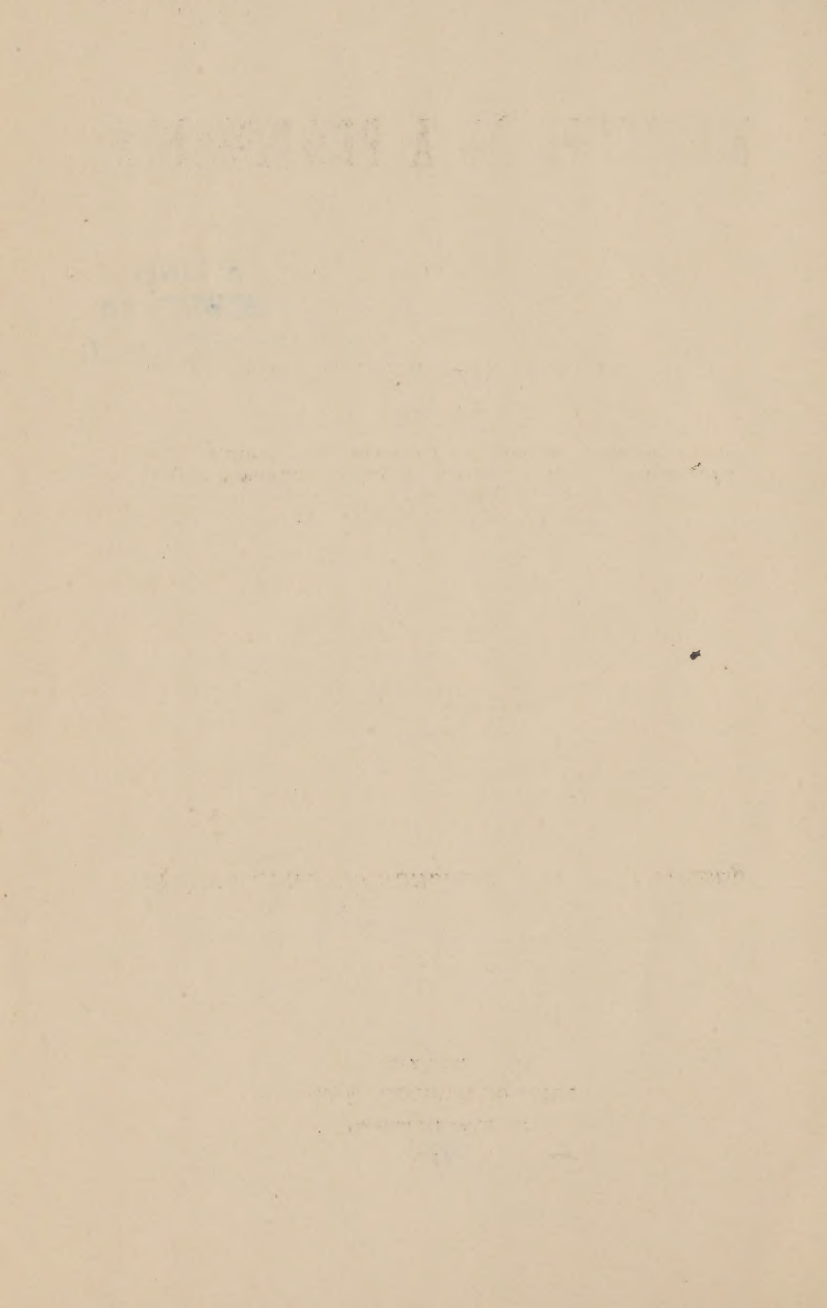


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# MEDICINE AS A PROFESSION.

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It is a pleasing task to defend the claims of the most interesting of human sciences as a life work. For the right man no other profession than medicine offers so good an opportunity, or so satisfactory a career. Just what constitutes the right man and the successful career will form the subject matter of our discussion. The choice of a profession at all pre-supposes tastes and inclinations different from those which actuate the average man in the pursuit of his daily bread-winning.

The cry of overcrowding in the profession is a false one. Of the medical profession at least one may speak with confidence in saying that there is great need of men, but the men to take these unfilled places must be men of excellent qualities of heart and mind.

That medicine as a science and as a profession has great attractions is shown by the fact that it is pursued by a very large number of those of independent fortune, and who take practically nothing in the way of financial return. For the man who enters medicine strictly as a profession, whose tastes are strong enough for him to regard it as a privilege to be able to gratify them, to whom no sacrifice is too great which leads to greater perfection in his attainments, there are great rewards. There is only bitterness and disappointment for the one who seeks riches and glory and power by using this learned profession as a means. As an end in itself the pursuit of medical science offers every attraction, as a means to other ends, but few promises.

To get into the medical profession a certain process is necessary which one should know before choosing this career. It is



popularly supposed that the medical degree is the gate-way. A student imagines that at one moment he is a lay-man, and a moment later through the magic of the diploma he holds in his hand, he is a physician. This is a great fallacy. It is the custom in this country to grant diplomas when a medical student's preliminary education is about two-thirds passed. The completion of the latter part of the preliminary education, the hospital course, is left to his own honor and discretion.

This often deceives the uninformed with the idea that a medical education is complete at the end of a medical college course of two, three or four years, while in fact from one to three years at least must be added to this, and considered education preliminary to practice. We are justified in regarding four and one-half to seven years as the time required by those possessing the degree of A. B. to properly enter the medical profession. On this account do not be misled by the fact that under our popular form of government few proper restrictions are placed upon the practice of medicine. Popular intelligence must take the place of law. Some States are in advance of others, but a legal right to act as a physician nowhere implies the moral right which proper training alone can give. In Massachusetts, for example, one may practice medicine without any degree or legal formality. In many States the mere perfunctory attendance upon two courses of lectures at any one of the so-called medical colleges that sprinkle our country from end to end, as if a great pepper box full of them had been shaken over it. However deceptive our apparent carelessness may be in this respect, what has been said about the requirements are practically true in most centres of intelligence. A medical degree does not give a man standing in the profession, nor does it give the public that confidence that will bring him patients. Occasionally a man surmounts by the inherent force of his character and by subsequent training, the disadvantages of a false start, but such, lament to the end of their careers that their college courses were deficient, or that they missed their hospital training.

A few words are necessary, to one who is considering medicine as a profession, in explanation of the so-called "schools of medicine."

The medical profession is the oldest of all professions. Its history is mentioned by Homer as if it had existed for a long time. We know that human nature and human relations have not changed a great deal since the time of the Siege of Troy.

Very soon after, or perhaps co-incident with the establishment of the medical profession, it was found expedient to adopt certain rules governing the relations of physicians. These were simple, easy to understand, founded on common sense, humanity, and a high morality. These have controlled the profession for these thousands of years. The history of medicine shows that in all ages there have been men unwilling to conform to these rules which have always been regarded necessary to the welfare of the profession. Even in the remotest times it was recognized that medical science was so extensive and complicated, and human hearts and minds so different, that it never would be possible for there to be a strict uniformity of practice and opinion among physicians. To put an end to disputes and dissensions for all time, the regular profession of that day, and the regular profession of this day, have followed a certain rule. It is this in substance—that every physician shall be allowed to practice and believe whatever principles of the healing art seem to him to be to the best interests of his patient. Within the confines of the medical family he may advocate any principles that he chooses, but he shall not publicly advocate any exclusive system of practice. Upon the disregard of this rule and not upon any difference of opinion or practice are founded all the sects of medicine. The regular profession has always gone on, but from time to time men or bodies of men, actuated by various motives, have thought best to claim to have some better method than their fellow practitioners. They have thought best to attach to their method of practice, the name of some sect, very much as a trade-mark is attached to some article of commerce. The regular profession has no such name, and never will have. The name “Allopathy” is an invention of those, who feeling the disgrace of their own trade-mark, wished to saddle one upon the regular profession. The continued existence of “new schools” is due to the same cause as the continued use of any

trade-mark in commerce—that is the demand for such an article. In the great centres of medical learning the question of different schools has long ceased to be a question of discussion. The medical meetings are scientific in character and spirit. Anyone with any subject or opinion whatsoever to present is given a respectful and attentive hearing. The science of medicine has so advanced in the past twenty years as to leave the knowledge previously possessed by the profession far behind, and the introduction of the scientific method has done much to dispel apparent differences of practice. It only rests with the public to restore harmony among all physicians, but so long as human nature is what it is, and one person wishes one kind of a doctor, and another wishes another kind of a doctor, greed of gain will always supply the demand.

The point to be remembered by those considering medical education is this—that in its very widest conception the ground of dispute between the so-called schools of medicine is no wider than differences of practice between individual men in any school. And more important still is the fact that it comprises but a part of medicine, namely, therapeutics, which though the part that is most prominently seen by the public, is yet but a small fraction of medical science. A properly trained student devotes perhaps nine-tenths of his energy during his college course to anatomy, physiology, the natural history of disease, etc., in order that during the remainder of his life he may have a proper foundation on which to cultivate the art of treatment. For this reason the profession feels confident that if a student has a sufficient scientific ground-work of the fundamental sciences, he will not go far astray in therapeutics. It is characteristic of all irregular schools of medicine that, lacking as they do the cultivation of the fundamental sciences, they have never contributed anything substantial to the advancement of learning, but have devoted their energies to claiming better systems of treatment. The power of diagnosis, the greatest test of medical attainments, depends wholly upon training of the kind that should precede the study of the application of drugs. Diagnosis has a broader meaning than simply naming a disease. It means a conception of the exact condition presented in each



individual patient, and the power to foretell what may be expected to happen.

There is one other matter that has of late years come so prominently before the profession and the public that it should even be considered by those who are deciding upon becoming physicians. The abuse of specialism in medicine is one of the dangers of the day to true medical science. Like all errors it has its foundation in a germ of truth. True specialists have always existed and have always been of benefit to the community and an honor to the profession. They have done much to advance the science of medicine and have attained great fame. These are men who on a broad basis of knowledge, education and general medical experience have achieved a high degree of success in some particular line of work, and this being recognized by their fellows, they had been so singled out to do that particular work that there is not time left for general practice.

The specialist of these days is often the product of the commercial spirit which has led the student to devote himself to certain showy accomplishments in the management of particular kinds of disease with the prime object of attaining patients and fees. Such a man lacking the balance of the trained judgment and the ripe experience of the true specialist is misled by every will-o'-wisp theory. He is deceived into declaring disease cured when symptoms have been temporarily removed. His patients are unduly elated by the often sincere assertions that they are cured, only to suffer disappointment when the hypnotic influence of the elaborate treatment has subsided. This does not apply to the really great men whose careers answer to the criterion that we have laid down, but to those men, who becoming specialists before they really become physicians are a detriment to the progress of medicine, and have done much in recent times to bring it into disrepute.

The highest place in the profession and in the community is, and always has been reserved for the great medical and surgical consultant. It is the place which is filled by the concurring judgment of the profession and of the community, and it is seldom occupied by the undeserving, and yet public

opinion has of late gone so far wrong that the man who asserts that his ambition is to be a general practitioner, and that his idea of a successful career is the attainment of the position of the general medical consultant arouses the derision of the mercenary public and the incredulity of a portion of the profession itself.

These things are necessary to be understood by one about to choose this profession. The requirements of the physician are a sufficient love of his science and of humanity for him to sacrifice most of the usual pleasures of men, all of his time, and all of his attention. He has the least chance of making money of any profession except the clergy, but fortunately, early in his career, the love of money is usually lost. His expectation of posthumous fame is very small. There have been many really great physicians in all ages, but one can count on his fingers all those that are remembered. Medical literature is re-written in every generation and the names of the original authors are omitted. To be really great the physician must have that love for his work which does not seek fame. The rewards of the physician must come chiefly from his own consciousness of work well done. For his maintenance he is dependent upon his fees which are in the nature of honorariums. He cannot himself place a value upon his work, and human gratitude seldom rises to the point of a proper compensation. He is the servant of all. When sent for he goes without thought of reward. In times of epidemic and plague he is sacrificed for the protection of the people, but such is his reputation for greatness of soul that this is hardly an occasion for remark. As was said in the beginning, the man who will look to the work itself as an end, and who will regard it as a privilege to be one of so great a profession, the choice of medicine as a career cannot be a mistake.

30 WEST THIRTY-SIXTH STREET.



